



Creating a Chinatown – Considerations for Christchurch

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ABSTRACT

With the recent innovation and development within Christchurch following the earthquakes there have been suggestions of developing an ethnic precinct or 'Chinatown' within the city. This article explores the possibility of this and its potential benefits.

1. INTRODUCTION

In May 2011, following the devastation from the earthquake that rocked the city earlier that year, the Christchurch City Council (CCC) launched its "Share an Idea" initiative, a project which lasted six weeks and collected more than 106,000 ideas from over 10,000 local participants (Christchurch City Council, 2011). These ideas were collated into a technical report and included as an appendix in the 2011 Draft Central City Plan (Draft Central City Recovery Plan, December 2011). Among the comments was the distinct desire for more 'ethnic' based areas, in particular the need for a Chinatown, an area imagined as being specifically for Chinese shops, restaurants and outdoor markets. While the creation of such an area may well enhance Christchurch's tourism and international image, some preconceptions must be analysed before undertaking such a project – namely, what are people looking for when they call for a 'Chinatown' and is it something that can be artificially constructed?

2. CHINATOWNS WITHIN NEW ZEALAND – A RECENT HISTORY

Within the CCC Draft Recovery Plan Share an Idea Summary, many respondents expressed the desire for more ethnic diversity within the city, in particular the creation of a Chinatown:

"I want Chinatown. Every great city has one."

"Ethnic enclaves, e.g. Chinatown..."

"Chinatown. Every great city has one, the city centre is big enough and needs different district."

Another SOL Square and Poplar Lane, with a Chinatown feel would be brilliant."

The respondents cited tourism, entertainment, retail and dining as the main reasons for these suggestions (Draft Central City Recovery Plan, December 2011, Technical Appendix A).

In 2008, the Auckland City Council had the same idea, and developed a plan to create a Chinatown district in New Lynn ('Chinatown on the cards for New Lynn,' November 2008). Planned to 'transform New Lynn' and fill the gap of a designated ethnic enclave precinct in New Zealand, it was meant to open in 2010 at the Waitakere Moon Festival ('Chinatown on West Auckland's horizon,' December 2008). However, plans fell through when the council and the newspapers received a series of angry

letters from the public against the plan ('Chinatown idea canned,' January 2009). Without public support, the idea fell through and the concept of a Chinatown for New Zealand was put on the shelf.

However, the idea was rekindled when in 2011 a 20-year master plan was released to the Auckland Future Vision Committee, detailing plans for the reinvigoration for Auckland's city centre (Harvey, S., February 2011). The plans included a proposal to create a Chinatown district in order to enforce Auckland's image as an international, multi-cultural city. The plan was spurred by the production of a study and report at Massey University which analysed Auckland's Dominion Road as an ethnic enclave and suggested that this area could be capitalised on to increase tourist interest (Dominion Rd is Auckland's Chinatown – Study, June 2011). The report, co-authored by Professor Paul Spoonley, research director for the University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences, pointed out that parts of Dominion Road had been developing as ethnic precincts over the last 20 years and could be capitalised upon to incite economic growth, tourism and opportunities for new immigrants. Indeed this area has already gained much popularity as a tourist site, being listed as number 32 in '100 things we love about Auckland' (*New Zealand Herald*, 2012). It was also pointed out that Auckland had yet to recognise ethnic precincts as a civic asset, and that this set it apart from other significant international cities, such as Toronto, San Francisco, Melbourne and New York, all of which had distinguished Chinatown districts. It was speculated that this has resulted in lost business opportunities both locally and internationally (Dominion Rd is Auckland's Chinatown – Study, June 2011). The report suggested a branded precinct or "...something more modest such as decorations or signage which reflects the Asian/Chinese character of sections of Dominion Road" (Tan, June 2011).

The result of these considerations is the creation of a designated cluster of Asian shops, markets, restaurants and entertainment areas in an enclosed shopping area on Ti Rakau Drive, in East Auckland. It is planned to open in October of 2012 and will help provide 'an authentic experience' to locals and tourists (Williams, 2010).

3. CHRISTCHURCH'S 'DOMINION ROAD'

Although Auckland's first attempt at establishing a Chinatown failed due to public dissent, the second attempt and impending success of the Auckland City Plan to develop an established Chinatown area could be attributed to a change in public mindset on the topic, helped in part by the public discourse on the subject as well as the recommendations from the university, as well as the recognition given to areas that had already developed as ethnic enclaves in their own right, such as Dominion Road. If this is what it takes to create an established Chinatown, does Christchurch have an area that has developed as a Chinese enclave?

Ethnic enclaves have traditionally referred to spatially confined areas where there is a concentration of an ethnic minority group (Luk & Phan, 2005). By looking at the distribution of Asian-identified residents within the city of Christchurch, a potential enclave area can be identified based on population numbers (figure 1.0). Within Christchurch, 17.5% of the Asian-identified population lives in the Western suburbs of Riccarton, Ilam, Sockburn and Upper Riccarton (Table 1.0). This area is home to Peerswick Mall shopping centre at the junction of Yaldhurst and Waimari Roads, the area commonly referred to as 'Chinatown' among the Asian locals (Anthony Chang; Gerard Chin, personal communication August 8th, 2012). While not exclusively Chinese, (the area contains a Korean grocer and a Japanese tea shop) it is an area that consists almost exclusively of Asian-run shops, including restaurants, grocers, health shops and an

electronics retailer aimed at the Asian market (Figure 1.2 and 1.3)

Indeed, the multi-ethnic nature of the area is consistent with the description that Luk and Phan (2005) discuss, describing 'new' Chinatowns that develop as a mix of Asian Cultures in the suburbs of international cities.



Figure 1.2 – China Town market at Peerswick Mall, the shop that gives the area the name of 'Chinatown' among the local Asian population. (Photo: Grace Duyndam)



Figure 1.3 – Zy Joy Market in Peerswick Mall, Christchurch. (Photo: Grace Duyndam)

4. CONCERNS OF AUTHENTICITY – 'REAL' VS 'FAKE'

During the consideration and development of the plans for Chinatown areas in Auckland, concerns were voiced about the validity of constructing an artificial Chinatown, as opposed to letting one develop naturally. In studies on the subject, the traditional view of Chinatowns is that they are 'towns within cities' (Lai, 1988) or residentially segregated sites where immigrants of certain ethnicities congregate

(Luk, 2005). Traditionally, Chinatowns have been viewed as areas of physical decay and social vice, and it was not until recently that they have been seen as areas of positive opportunity for economic growth. Chinatowns have sprung up all around the world in various cities – San Francisco in the United States being the most well-known.

In 2011 Auckland City councillors Sandra Coney and Mike Lee expressed their concerns about the authenticity of the Chinatown project, saying that such an area should evolve by itself as opposed to being planned (Harvey, February 2011). Luk and Phan (2005) discuss ethnic enclaves as areas arising from immigrants' desire to keep their culture alive in a foreign land, and thus occur naturally as immigrants arrive in a new area. Even the 2011 report by Massey University states that these areas help "maintain their cultural identities by speaking a native language, eating familiar foods and meeting with others born in their homeland" ('Dominion Rd is Auckland's Chinatown – Study,' June 2011) – they simply suggest that this naturally arising opportunity be capitalised upon.

However, the difference between a naturally occurring Chinatown and one that is constructed by the council as a tourist outlet can result in two entirely different outcomes – is this perhaps why non-Asian Christchurch residents do not recognise their local Chinatown? According to Du-Dehart (2012) it is often the case that ethnic enclaves develop as a result of segregation of the community, and therefore isolation of the pocket communities can occur. Is the delicate balance between maintaining authenticity and encouraging non-Asian patronage the key to creating a successful Chinatown area? If so, then this must be one of the key considerations in its development.

Another concern raised was the issue of alienation – both of the Asian population concerned and the local New Zealander population (Editorial: Chinatown ideas doesn't

need city's nurturing, 2011; Tan, 2011). Segregation was also a concern, with the labelling of a distinct 'Chinatown' causing alarm. Avoiding these issues is an important consideration in creating a thriving ethnic precinct.

One final concern raised was the issue of aesthetics and planning regulations, particularly on the subject of signs. A Massey University study of ethnic (non-English language; see figure 1.4) signs showed that the majority of New Zealanders were uncomfortable with them, reacting with 'annoyance' (Tan & Donnell, 2012). Was this perhaps one of the reasons why the New Lynn development project failed?



Figure 1.4 – Chinese signs at Peerswick Mall, Christchurch. Signs similar to these were shown to be adversely received by the New Zealand public (Tan & Donnell, 2012). (Photo: Grace Duyndam).

In light of all of these concerns, it seems apparent that what the Kiwi population is calling for may not be the traditional Chinatown that has developed through natural segregation in older cities, but rather a constructed, tourist area, carefully planned and presented. This disconnect in ideals must be addressed before any concrete plans are made to either develop a designated Chinatown area in Christchurch or to take steps to foster the development of a naturally occurring ethnic precinct in the suburbs. In either case, the City Council's vision and the desires of the public must be aligned.

5. CONCLUSION

In 2011, the Share an Idea survey by the Christchurch City Council received numerous responses asking for a Chinatown area in the city. Although the 2012 Central City Plan does not plan for any such area, there is the potential for developing one in the western suburbs of the city where the Asian resident population is the highest and there are already established Asian-owned businesses. However, the area called for by Christchurch residents may be dissimilar to what is traditionally considered a 'Chinatown.' Therefore the CCC should take great consideration before investing effort into the establishment of such an area, whether by active planning or through passive fostering of the areas which already exist.

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